

MORAL ENLIGHTENMENT IN ‘GREAT EXPECTATIONS’

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Abstract

Joe’s Christian charity far exceeds worldly justice and worldly glory by giving kindness where cruelty had been dealt, a supreme act of loving those who have been unkind and hostile to you where one had extended love and mercy as a loving parent but indeed was returned with ingratitude and condescension. Hence Pip’s moral enlightenment or Bildungsroman in Great Expectations is towards humility and the lesson that it is not the wealthy, aristocratic or famous in this world who will extend you true friendship at one’s time of need but paradoxically the lowly like Joe Gargery and Magwitch the criminal. Pip thus progresses from blindly worshipping wealth to humbly accepting that true nobility indeed transcends class and is not a function of class, as the sacrifice of Joe Gargery and Magwitch so vividly illustrates.

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In *Great Expectations*, Pip experiences a moral journey in which he discovers that money is not all the measure of a person’s worth and certain ideals like friendship which is true and sincere transcend class as he discovers his only true friends in the novel are those lowly esteemed in society like Joe Gargery and Magwitch. Some critics have labelled *Great Expectations* to this end a snob’s progress and indeed Pip’s journey from a lowly blacksmith’s intern to a gentleman in which he acquires money but class snobbery and social pretension along with it, when it eludes him that the source of his wealth is not Miss Havisham but Magwitch, a lowly criminal. Pip then indeed discovers that class pretensions are an illusion and hypocrisy because they have blinded him to who his true friends and allies are, namely Joe Gargery and Magwitch.

Indeed, on hearing of their need to part, here is Joe Gargery’s honest and moving response:

Pip, dear old chap, life is made up of ever so many partings welded together, as I may say, and one man’s a blacksmith and one’s a whitesmith, and one’s a goldsmith, and on one’s a coppersmith. Divisions arise among such must come, and must be met as they come. If there’s been any fault at all today, It’s mine. You and me is not two figures to be together in London, nor yet anywhere else but what is private, and beknownm and understood among friends. It ain’t that I am proud, but that I want to be right, as you shall never see no more in these clothes. I’m wrong in these clothes. I’m wrong out of the forge, the kitchen, or off th’ meshes. You won’t find half so much fault in one if, supposing as you should ever wish to

see me, you come and put your head at the forge window and see Joe the blacksmith, there, at the old anvil, in the old burnt apron, sticking to old work. I'm awful dull, but I hope I've beaten out something nigh the rights of this at last.(Dickens, 1860: 27)

Character is thus not a function of class, Joe's sincerity shines through Pip's condescension towards him, and there is more value in the honest integrity of Joe's labour than the corrupted idleness of Miss Havisham, who has raised Estella to be a monster that thwarts men's desire because she was herself abandoned as a bride. Indeed money is seen to be a source of corruption and entrapment, as Pip gains airs and is condescending towards his true friends Joe and Biddy because of his rise in station while pining for the cruel and heartless Estella who is indeed engineered to make fools of men in their desire for her in order to exact Miss Havisham's revenge on men. In another passage Pip reflects on the tainted source of his advancement:

I consumed the whole time in thinking how strange it was that I should be encompassed by all this taint of prison and crime, that, in my childhood out on our lonely marshes on a winter evening I should have first encountered it; that it should have reappeared on two occasions, starting out like a stain that was faded but not gone; that, it should in this new way pervade my fortune and advancement. (Dickens 1860: 32)

Thus while Pip has been deceived into thinking as a consequence of his hollow class aspiration that his benefactor is Miss Havisham, the truth at that time eludes him that he is complicit with crime and degradation by virtue of his inheritance of the fortune from Magwitch and the source of his snobbery is in no way exalted or from high places but from the lowly, wretched, despised and criminal source of Magwitch who has resolved to make a puppet gentleman out of Pip in order to spite and revenge the society which has spurned and marginalized him. Hence Pip's social snobbery that accompanies his rise in rank is ultimately exposed to be a hypocrisy as its source is not exalted or aristocratic but lowly and criminal.

Pip misguidedly believes when he comes into fortune that Miss Havisham is his benefactor and that intends to groom him into a gentleman in order to wed Estella, and the first thing that changes is his attitude towards his childhood companions and benefactors Joe Gargery and Biddy. Immediately Pip feels that Joe and Biddy are unworthy of him, he is ashamed of Joe for not being educated and desires to give Joe an education while Biddy is seen as inferior in social standing to the wealthy and worldly, but monstrous Estella who has been trained by Miss Havisham from young to thwart men's desire in order to enact her revenge on men for having been abandoned at her own wedding. When Biddy objects to Pip's plans for civilizing Joe, Pip is condescending and patronizing "I am extremely sorry to see this in you Biddy....It's a – It's a bad side of human nature."(Dickens 1860: 176) Immediately his long cherished childhood friends are deemed inferior to him by virtue of their lack of wealth and education, but indeed this class snobbery is shown to be an illusion when Pip discovers that Estella is a monster trained to break men's hearts and that he has fallen into Miss Havisham's trap for aspiring class snobs like him.

"So proud, so proud!" moaned Miss Havisham, pushing away her grey hair with both hands.

"Who taught me to be proud?" returned Estella. "Who praised me when I learned my

lesson?

“So hard, so hard” moaned Miss Havisham with her former action.

“Who taught me to be hard?” retuned Estella. “Who praised me when I learnt my lesson?”

“But to be proud and hard to me!” Miss Havisham quite shrieked, as she stretched out her arms. “Estella, Estella, to be proud and hard to me! (Dickens 1860:323)

Hence we see that Miss Havisham regrets training Estella to be a monster conceived to break men’s hearts when she receives no warmth, gratitude or affection from Estella in return. Pip’s class snobbery and affection is indeed shown to be misguided and an illusion when he learns he has invested his affection in what turns out to be a trap for men like him, social climbers with class aspirations who fall for the heartless Estella who has been rigorously trained by Miss Havisham to break men’s hearts from young in revenge for the heartbreak she herself suffered at her wedding by being abandoned by her fiancé. Miss Havisham herself is indeed a monstrous figure as we see in chapter 8:

I entered, therefore, and found myself in a pretty large room, well lighted with wax candles. No glimpse of daylight was to be seen in it. It was a dressing room, as I supposed from the furniture, though much of it was in forms and uses quite unknown to me. Not prominent in it was a draped table with a gilded looking glass, and that I made out to be a fine lady’s dressing table.

Whether I should have made out this object so soon, if there had been no fine lady sitting at it, I cannot say. In an arm chair, with an elbow resting on the table and her head leaning on that hand, sat the strangest lady I have ever seen, or ever shall see.

She was dressed in rich materials- satin, lace and silks – all white. Her shoes were white. And she had a long white veil dependent from her hair, and she had a bridal flower in her hair, but her hair was white. Some bright jewels sparkled on her neck and on her hands, and some other jewels lay sparkling on the table. Dresses, less splendid than the dress she wore, and half packed trunks were scattered about. She had not quite finished dressing, for she had but one shoe on – the other was on the table near her hand- her veil was half arranged, her watch and chain were not put on, and some lace for her bosom lay with trinkets, and with her handkerchief, and gloves, and some flowers and a prayer book all confusedly heaped about the looking glass

It was not in the first moments that I saw all these things, though I was more of them in the first moments than I supposed. But, I saw that everything within my view which ought to be white had been white long ago, and had lost its lustre, and was faded and yellow. I saw that the bride within the bridal dress had withered like the dress, and like the flowers, and had no brightness left but the brightness of her sunken eyes. I saw that the dress had been put upon the rounded figure of a young woman, and that the figure on which it now hung loose, had shrunk to skin and bone. Once, I had been taken to see some ghastly waxwork at the Fair, representing I know not what impossible personage lying in the state. Once, I had been taken to one of our old parish churches too see a skeleton in the ashes of a rich dress, that had been

dug out of a vault under the church pavement. Now, waxwork and skeleton seemed to have dark eyes that moved and looked at me. I should have cried out if I could. (Dickens 1860: 86-87)

Pip thus discovers in Miss Havisham a figure of extreme decay and decomposition, indeed Miss Havisham may be wealthy but her outward appearance of physical decay belies her inner moral decay, in having been forsaken at the wedding alter Miss Havisham has resolved to stop all time and progress in her life and preserve and thus entomb herself in the moment she was forsaken at the wedding altar in eternal wedding dress now grown yellow and mouldy, much like the inner moral decay that has taken place as she has now resolved to use Estella as a weapon against men because her heart was broken in her youth. It is thus highly ironic that it is this figure of physical and moral decay, Miss Havisham, and her haughty disciple Estella that Pip invests his dreams and adoration in, we see Pip has invested himself in false and hollow ideals as Pip believes a figure of extreme decay both inner and outer is his material benefactor and that the aloof and haughty Estella will be his prize. In contrast to the honesty, warmth and affection of Joe Gargery and Biddy whom he now scorns we see that Pip has exchanged a truth for a material lie. Pip fundamentally believes that the wealth of Miss Havisham makes her socially and morally superior to Joe and Biddy but in this passage we see Pip has invested his ideals in extreme moral decay and it is an illusion which will be eventually shattered when Pip learns his true benefactor is not Miss Havisham but Magwitch. Estella herself reveals this early in the novel:

“It is not easy even for you... to know what satisfaction it gives me to see those people thwarted, or what an enjoyable sense of the ridiculous I have when they are made ridiculous. For you were not brought up in that strange house as a mere baby- I was. You had not your little wits sharpened by their intriguing against you, suppressed and defenseless, under the mask of sympathy and pity and what not, that is wild and soothing- I had. You did not gradually open your round childish eyes wider and wider to the discovery of that imposter of a woman who calculates her stores of peace of mind when she wakes up in the mind- I did.”

It was no laughing matter with Estella now, nor was she summoning these remembrances from any shallow place. I would not have been the cause of that look of hers, for all my expectations were in a heap.”(Dickens 1860: 30)

Pip thus discovers his class snobbery has been invested in a monstrous plan to thwart and enact revenge on men for the injustice Miss Havisham experienced when young, his class pretensions have been invested in a cruel trick and vain illusion and his world comes crashing down along with his social airs when he realizes this.

Pip finally learns that character is independent of class and station when he discovers a true friend in Joe:

At last, one day, I took courage, and said, “Is it Joe?”

And the dear old home voice answered, “ Which is air, old chap.”

“O Joe, you break my heart! Look angry at me Joe. Strike me, Joe.

Tell me of my ingratitude. Don’t be so ood to me!

For Joe had actually laid his head down on the pillow at my side, and

put His arm around my neck, in his joy I knew him.

“Which dear old Pip, old chap.” said Joe, : You and me was ever friends, And when you’re well enough to go out for a ride- what larks! After which, Joe withdrew from the window, and stood with his back towards me wiping his eyes. And as my extreme weakness prevented me from getting up and going to him, I lay there, penitently whispering, “Old God bless him! O God bless this gentle Christian man! Joe’s eyes were red when I next found him beside me, but I was holding his hand and we both felt happy. (Dickens 1860: 529-530)

Pip is thus haunted by guilt caused by the shabby manner in which he has treated Joe and for his ingratitude and condescension towards him, but in this scene we discover in Joe’s Christian charity an element of incalculable Christian grace and mercy, which gives without expecting to receive, which repays scorn and injustice with kindness and hospitality. Joe’s Christian charity far exceeds worldly justice and worldly glory by giving kindness where cruelty had been dealt, a supreme act of loving those who have been unkind and hostile to you where one had extended love and mercy as a loving parent but indeed was returned with ingratitude and condescension. Hence Pip’s moral enlightenment or *Bildungsroman* in *Great Expectations* is towards humility and the lesson that it is not the wealthy, aristocratic or famous in this world who will extend you true friendship at one’s time of need but paradoxically the lowly like Joe Gargery and Magwitch the criminal. Pip thus progresses from blindly worshipping wealth to humbly accepting that true nobility indeed transcends class and is not a function of class, as the sacrifice of Joe Gargery and Magwitch so vividly illustrates.

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